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ABSTRACT

Recommendations for assisting the functionally illiterate adult are given. These include: (1) administration of quality adult education programs to them, (2) administration of basic education programs with LOGICAL OUTREACH components, (3) positive incentives for learning, (4) exemplary teachers, (5) proper evaluation, and (6) maximum cooperation between Federal, state, and local agencies. (CK)

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A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE ADULTS

Clive C. Veri

As professional adult educators, we cannot help but feel that the work which adult basic education people are doing has to be counted among the most important in society. We are all aware of the injustices around us, but the injustice of being an illiterate adult in a complex world where reading and writing are nearly as necessary as eating and breathing, is simply appalling. How can anyone even live a minimal Good Life when he or she cannot read or write?

The United States faces the shame of having three million adults who are totally unable to read and write; there are nearly another twenty million Americans who read so poorly that they are classified as functional illiterates. Yes, illiteracy is a shame which this country faces. By contrast, the Soviet Union has an illiteracy rate of 2%, Japan 1-2%, France 0-3%, and Sweden none. This is what the U.S. Office of Education tells us, but everyone in ABE must have their own gut feeling of the magnitude of illiteracy in this country as they interact daily with educationally deprived adults.

In the past year of national politics, it was no wonder that nearly half of the Americans of voting age did not participate in the 1972 choice

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of the Chief Executive of the United States! Voter apathy, perhaps; but out of more than 134 million potential voters eighteen years of age and older, over 21 million people are funtionally illiterate and these people were certain to stay away from the polls. Politicians had better realize, and realize fast that about one out of six people they meet on the streets of America are potential non-voters (or else they are told how to vote by ward bosses!) because of their inability to read and to address themselves to the issues. This kind of non-participation is a deeply unhealthy condition for a country which represents a democracy and for a country which boasts the world's highest standard of living.

What does ABE certification mean precisely? If it is anything like certification requirements for school teachers or lawyers, or practicing physicians, ABE certification is some arbitrary set of standards laid down by someone who is a supposed "expert" and knows "where it's at." If last year's figures are any indication, 18,500 ABE teachers will be "body counted" among those who will have some sort of training leading toward ABE certification however arbitrary certification might be and however relevant or irrelevant the workshops or seminars might be.

Time is running out. We have to quit holding annual certification workshops which are once-a-year, discrete training efforts. Rather, we must plan systematic programs which build upon a teacher's background going from the known to the unknown. We must develop systematic on-the-job training programs spaced throughout the year. We must develop meaningful certification criteria which will enable a teacher to say with pride, "I am qualified to teach functionally illiterate adults." Adult educators have to recognize the fact that the Soviet Union, Japan, France, and Sweden

have a better educated adult citizenry than does the United States. We must use our skills in designing purposeful certification criteria for ABE teachers, conduct programs which will help teachers to meet these criteria, and focus our professional efforts on reducing adult illiteracy in the United States.

Redirection? Not really. Recommitment and dedication to making sense out of nonsense seems to be more applicable. As a start, we might ratify a "Bill of Rights for Functionally Illiterate Adults" and, for the sake of adult learners, take leadership for reducing the shameful illiteracy we have in an otherwise great country.

Preamble

Perhaps as a preamble to a "Bill of Rights for Functionally Illiterate Adults" we should start out with the prayer: "Oh Lord, grant me the strength to change things that need changing, the courage to accept things that cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference." Certainly, this does not sound as if it had ecclesiastical origin. Rather, the prayer sounds as if it were authored by Abraham Lincoln while he was building up his courage in the 1860's to cause the most important socio-political event in our country's history.

"Grant us the strength to change things..." ABE is a mess and has been for too long!

Article 1 Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect

Adult education literature is replete with admonitions that our adult illiteracy problem has its roots in low quality, substandard kindergarten through twelfth grade programs. We are told that such programs are ego-destructive, have no meaning to the real world, and actually de-motivate people from wanting to learn. We are told also that personal attributes of people called school dropouts (more probably "push-outs") are such that they lack self-confidence, live in conditions of cultural and economic poverty, or lack the intellectual ability to cope with school work.

Whatever the reasons--society generated or personally generated--the fact is that functionally illiterate adults do fear school, seem to live for today, and have affective goals (that is, attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings and opinions) which are different from educators' typical middle class goals.

Our ABE programs must be different from that which were given to our now adult learners when they were kids. The program must be of high quality which stimulates the learner to learn and which results in graduating the learner to whatever educational level he aspires.

What is high quality? We know high quality is not a program which is textbook oriented, time-block centered around fifty-minute classes, and negative behavior modification oriented--that's worse than low quality! In the opinion of knowledgable adult basic educators, quality is represented

by criteria which will enable a learner to:

- Study in a true learning system which has testing, counseling, remedial, enrichment and feedback subsystems;
- Enter the teaching-learning situation at any point in time;
- Set his or her own educational goals;
- Learn at his own speed and with a variety of learning media which he feels comfortable in using;
- Be in an environment which stimulates him to motivation; an environment which is permissive and threat-free; and
- Study with learning media which are now-oriented and related to his today world.

The best measure of the high quality of an ABE program is one which graduates 100 percent of its incoming learners according to standards acceptable by society such as the high school equivalency certification based on the GED test. This zero attrition rate is a goal toward which our professional lives must be directed.

Article 2 Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect that ABE programs will have LOGICAL OUTREACH components.

Simply put, this proposed article says, "You gotta reach 'em before you teach 'em."

There are several ways to recruit functionally illiterate adults into the ABE classroom. One is by word of mouth from learner to learner. Another is direct recruiting by the ABE training center's staff through

course of study catalogues, by advertisements in newspapers, by direct mail and posters. Another way is where one agency, such as a Model City neighborhood corporation or Welfare Department, refers clients to the ABE training center.

Any logical outreach component would include these components, but we must give thought to:

- Advertising in the communications media to which functionally illiterate adults have access. If people cannot read, it is illogical to use flyers, handouts, newspaper ads, and other printed materials. We would get much better results using public service TV and radio announcements which are as stimulating as advertisements selling Alka Seltzer tablets.
- Developing a cadre of street corner workers who know the people in the neighborhoods they work and who can, by word of mouth, stimulate potential learners to enroll in an ABE program. Such workers might be paid but have we given much thought to effectively marshalling the "street corner workers" we have in society who already work the streets? They know their neighbors and interact with them daily. They are people such as clergymen, checkers at grocery store counters, social workers, policemen, confectionary operators, and on and on. They can read and write, and they can become your logical outreach arms at little or no cost.
- Offering ABE programs within the life spaces of the learners.

Recall that one of the measures of high quality mentioned in Article 1 was to create a stimulating environment which was threat-free and permissive. Where else could we better offer a program than in a storefront within five blocks of the learners' homes? Let's run the operation like a floating crap game: provide a learning center for the fifteen people we have been able to recruit within a ten square block area and when we have finished, move the "game" to another location. Certainly, there are centers like that but we also have too many learners traveling to schools, bank buildings, and ramshackled inner city hotels where they attend school-like classes with fifty or a hundred others.

These are three manageable suggestions for a logical outreach component. Think about how learner's homes could become ABE centers by use of audiocassette tape recorders, closed circuit radio, the telephone and dial access information retrieval systems, and videotape cassettes in living color and stereo! Picture, if you will, a mobile learning center, much like a traveling library, which delivers learning media to the home and which contains home visitors who can stimulate the learners.

Article 3 Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect POSITIVE INCENTIVES once they are enrolled in an ABE program.

ABE literature seems to be coming to the conclusion that the greatest incentive for getting people into programs is the vocational goal. That

is, adults who cannot read or write are motivated to do so to either qualify themselves for a job or to advance in the job they already have. Given that the vocational goal is a powerful reason for enrolling in a program, our task is to provide strong positive incentives to retain those who initially commit themselves to the learning process.

It is clear that if ABE is to be effective, it has to offer both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives. Our job is to continually bridge the gap between the personal goals of the learner and the basic education we have to offer.

We know that money can be an incentive but it can also be a rake-off for the learners. In addition to a salary, some programs offer clothes and products such as lamps, toolboxes, and radios which the learners produce on a factory assembly line. Some programs give S & H stamps, gold stars, free groceries, or certificates for every grade level completed.

While these tangibles might be important, we have to tap the psychological stuff that people are made of. Teachers, <u>especially</u> teachers, have to manipulate themselves in such a way that they build within the learner a sense of accomplishment and honest-to-goodness, hard-won achievement. A learner's ego and pride must be built by the skills and arts of the teacher. And, it need not be said that even in the best possible relationship between a teacher and a learner, one wrong word, or perhaps more importantly, one wrong non-verbal expression can result in a push-out.

Article 4 Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect to be taught by the most EXEMPLARY TEACHERS of this land.

Why do teachers become ABE teachers? This question was recently posed to a half dozen teachers attending a certification workshop. One of them, a full-time ABE teacher said "By October I didn't have a job yet and I needed to eat, man." Another fulltimer responded by saying that she always had discipline problems with her junior high school students and had to get out of the classroom before she went nuts. An evening class teacher said she needed the extra money. And, a matronly woman who had been out of the classroom for some twenty years, and whose husband had recently died, said she wanted to get out of the house and do something to help people.

We should not judge these responses. They merely point out that not one of the teachers said "I felt that ABE was my bag and consciously made the choice to earn a baccalaureate degree in the field." They could not have said that because, unless things have changed in recent months, there isn't a college or university in this country which offers a baccalaureate degree in adult basic education. Parenthetically, though, there were at least 23,241 ABE teachers in the U.S. in 1971-72.

How does one become an exemplary or master ABE teacher? Hopefully, we find exemplary teachers with a great ability to teach youth and retread them to teach adults. We should be very uncomfortable with this model because it assumes we find and attract the best teachers. The rest of the story, based on a more spurious assumption, is that we then give this teacher

some structured OJT combined with certification workshops, and bingo--instant ABE teacher. Add these assumptions with the reality of ABE programs and the tenuous job security they offer and it is a wonder that we have ABE teachers at all!

Do not get the impression that we should be down on ABE teachers; far from it. We should be uptight with Federal programs and the society which allows such programs to be born with inadequately planned delivery systems. And, once we have a national effort like we have to stamp our illiteracy, we should even become disgruntled about universities which turn their ivory towered backs to the problem.

What is an exemplary ABE teacher? It would take a professorial committee years to arrive at a definition! If there is an answer it would have to suggest that he or she must possess the arts, the skills, and the wiles of <u>any</u> teacher. When interacting with adults, however, we would have to add that an ABE teacher must listen and hear what a learner says (really, to listen between the lines), and an exemplary ABE teacher must be filled with warmth, friendliness, tact, genuine concern, and most of all, integrity.

<u>Article 5</u> Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect that they, and the programs they are in, are properly and honestly EVALUATED.

As an analogy, evaluation is to program as leaven is to bread. They both permeate and modify.

Without evaluation--proper and honest evaluation--we simply would not know where to start learners in a program, what parts of a program needed to

be changed, how effective a teacher was, or when a learner was ready to exit from the program. Evaluation is both the beginning and the ending point in any program. It is the responsibility of teachers, counselors, administrators, and even funding agencies.

Evaluation is not the body count concept with which we seem enamoured. As an aside, but directly related to body count, there is a rumor going on in Washington which does not speak well for ABE's future. As the statistics professor said, "There are liars, there are damned liars, and then there are statisticians." To that now is being added "... and then there are ABE administrators!" Has someone been inflating the number of adults enrolled in ABE programs?

Learning in any educational program is behavioral change. In order to measure this change we have to know the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills of the learner both before and after the learning experience. This means that pretests and post-tests must be given to learners, first, to determine where they are, and secondly, where they have been as a result of the learning experience. If the learner's behavior has not been changed, the evaluations will give us a base from which we can alter the learning experiences--including behavioral objectives, content, scope and sequence, media and methods, and teacher behaviors.

Evaluation nearly mandates that everyone concerned with an ABE program has a sense of experimentation. Even with the current state of ABE development, what is being done now merely amounts to a series of experiments anyway. People in the ABE movement are a bunch of mavericks, unhappy with the

status quo. They do have a sense of experimentation whether the busyness of their days allow or not.

One admonition: we must be honest in our evaluations. We must not cheat for the test. If we certify a person with an eighth grade or GED certificate, we must make certain that the person truly earned the achievement. If we do "fudge" the results, we should be run out of education!

Article 6 Functionally illiterate adults have the right to expect MAXIMUM COOPERATION between Federal, state and local agencies.

This is a pie-in-the-sky Article since we will never (categorically, never) see cooperation among the bureaucracies! At last count there were some twenty-five Federal programs in eight agencies supporting programs to reduce functional illiteracy in the United States (Labor has 8, HEW has 6, the Office of Economic Opportunity has 4, Defense 3, Interior 2, Justice 2, HUD 1, and Veterans Administration 1). We will never see cooperation until a majority of Congressmen see the folly of their past actions and combine ABE legislation into a single law. The ideal then would be to put a qualified ABE specialist in charge of the administering agency rather than some political hack and get on with the task of a single national effort to reduce the shame of illiteracy in this country.

Because of the proliferation of Federal programs, we do not have a national goal toward which to work. We have to face squarely the fallacy of the assumption which says if a person learns to read and do arithmetic,

he can advance himself. In order to cope with today's complex social conditions, a funtionally illiterate adult needs, in addition to the 3 R's, to know about consumer education, citizen's rights, proper nutrition and health practices, orientation to the world of work, and coping skills needed to get along in society.

With concerted effort and leadership from an agency like a state department of education, perhaps it might be possible to achieve maximum cooperation among agencies at the local level. In any given city, for example, along with the Title III program funded by the U.S. Office of Education, we can find programs funded by Labor, HUD, Justice, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and private agencies such as the Opportunities Industrial Corporation, Kingdom House, and the Jewish Employment Vocational Service. Would it not be a great idea if some state department of education called a meeting of these agency heads and offered to provide, first, high quality training workshops and OJT supervision, at no cost, and secondly, leadership and staff to organize street corner workers? This would only be a beginning, but certainly we have to start somewhere.

We simply must have cooperation if we are ever to reduce functional illiteracy in the United States. We have the problems. Now we need imaginative leadership to solve them.

H-E-L-P M-E

These, then, are proposed articles for "A Bill of Rights for Functionally Illiterate Adults." There are many others which can be added.

A summary of these six articles, however would say, in the words of a functionally illiterate adult:

You who can read and write;
you who have gone to college;
you who have been blessed with the skills and
abilities to teach;
please, please help me.

Please help me by providing:
H - high quality programs,
E - exemplary teachers,
L - a logical outreach component, and
P - positive incentives.

Please help me by getting:
M - maximum cooperation out of the bureaucracies.
Please help me by:
E - evaluating both me and your programs.

What can we do? At least three things. We can do nothing. We can continue doing what we are doing now, day in and day out, whether it is good or bad, whether it helps or irrevocably damages people. Or, we can develop within ourselves a compulsive compassion for the functionally illiterate adult and an honest-to-goodness commitment to make ourselves into the best damned ABE specialists who ever entered a classroom.

In short, we have the "stuff" or can develop the stuff it takes to reduce the shameful illiteracy we have in these United States. Like the six articles proposed in this Bill of Rights, HELP 'EM---and that's spelled:

H - for high quality programs

E - for exemplary teaching

L - for a logical outreach component

P - for positive incentives

E - for evaluation of learners and programs, and

M - for getting maximum cooperation out of the Establishment

"Oh Lord, grant us the strength to change things, the courage to accept things that cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."

We in adult education, especially in adult basic education, have more to change than most educators. We have to pick people up whose attitudes toward education are highly negative because they have been pushed out of schools at young, impressionable ages. Physically, their backs are not scarred from being treated brutally, but their opinions, values, attitudes, and beliefs toward education have been whiplashed; this is what we must change. We must have the strength to work with these educationally sick people, and the courage to pick up the gauntlet for them, to join politicians, cajole bureaucrats, and answer the HELP ME call.

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